

Sharing Your Legacy: A Reminiscence Therapy Strategy

Objective

To reflect on your life by writing a life script that you can share with your family.

What to Know

Older adults, their families, and therapists are increasingly recognizing the value of reminiscences and life reflection. Research has shown that sharing and recording life stories is beneficial and a powerful tool for everyone involved in the process. There is evidence that writing or reminiscing about family history improves self-esteem, enhances feelings of control and mastery over life, and can result in an expanded vision of one's life. In addition, when seniors are offered the chance to tell their stories, it improves cognition, reduces depressive symptoms, decreases stress, and improves behavioral functioning. This process can build and strengthen relationships among family members – even leading to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Here are three ways you can record your life story:

- **Write it down.** Write it out longhand. Join a small group of seniors in a regular writing group to build camaraderie and receive support.
- **Interview.** A family member or caregiver can interview you and record it. If your caregiver or family member cannot interview you, hire an experienced professional, who may also include family pictures, home movies, and other materials.
- **Create a script.** You can type an organized and formal “life script” and present the information as an audio, slide show, video, or even a podcast.

This exercise will help you reflect on your life and write a script that you can share with your family.

What to Do

Step 1. Gather the following materials before you begin.

- **Pictures** you have collected so you can sort out the ones you would like to include. Try to have the approximate date each picture was taken and the names of the people in each.
- **Family videos** that accurately reflect your message.
- **Artwork** (or pictures of the artwork) which have meaning to you. You might even want to do some art or craftwork to share.
- **Music**, like songs played at weddings, parties, events, and so on.

Step 2. Collect the following details.

1. Birthdates of your parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and great-grandparents.
2. Significant dates, beginning with the wedding dates of your grandparents and your parents.

3. Geographic locations where your parents' families were raised, and the locations where you lived from birth to present.

4. Schools you attended by date, location, and years you moved or graduated.

5. Jobs you have held, including dates, locations, and what you did/your role.

6. Transitions you experienced and what helped (or would have helped) to make them go smoothly, such as:

- graduating from high school or college / attending college / getting a job
- moving out of your family's home
- moving from one job to another
- moving to a new community
- getting married / divorced
- having children
- seeing your children make the same transitions you did
- retiring from full-time employment
- grieving losses / deaths

7. Write down the significant people in your life and why they were important to you. This list might include spouse(s), relatives, teachers, coaches, spiritual guides, friends, mentors, co-workers, children, and so on.

8. Write down cherished memories.

9. Answer these questions:

- What are you most proud of?
- What do you most regret?
- If you could have changed certain things in your life, what would they be?
- What are you glad happened in your life – even though at the time you wished it had not happened?
- What did you always want to accomplish or experience but never had the time, money, or ability?

10. Write down lessons you learned and list values and beliefs that guided you.

11. Write about people who hurt you and whom you have forgiven (or now want to forgive).

12. List hopes you have for your family members.

13. List the blessings which you wish for your family members.

Step 3. Write your script loosely following these guidelines.

1. History of your family going back to your grandparents (or even before)

- background of grandparents and parents
- cherished memories and stories
- lessons you learned

2. Personal history

- describe your family of origin
- schools attended and what you learned from each
- people you encountered in your younger years and the impact they had on your life
- jobs you held and the people you met at those jobs

3. Transitions

- advice you want to offer family members on how to make successful transitions

- what does and does not work in handling transitions
- steps you hope your family members will take when they face transitions

4. Values and beliefs

- how your values and beliefs guided you
- the values and beliefs you wish your family will carry on
- the positive impact of maintaining your values and beliefs

5. Lessons learned

- from tragedies, mistakes, errors of judgment, accidents, challenges, obstacles

6. Regrets for past decisions or actions

- things in the past for which you have regrets and how they influenced you
- advice to your family regarding holding on to regrets

7. Who and what you forgave

- advice to your family regarding forgiving others

8. Hopes for the future, blessings, and messages of love

- your hopes for the future of your family

Is there anything else you would like to include?

Step 4: How to use your script.

Here are some ideas about what you can do with your script.

1. Use the script for a video you create in which you talk to your family.
2. Create a PowerPoint that contains your script and images.
3. Make an audio or podcast.
4. Print the script out as book.
5. Do all the above!

Other ideas:

- If you live in an assisted living facility or nursing home, ask a loved one or caretaker to attach a bulletin board above your bed that displays poems, stories, artwork, and anything else you would like to share.
- Use tools that offer you a structured way of telling your story and passing your legacy along to children and grandchildren. Some helpful apps:
 - [OneDay](#) – a prompted question-and-answer app with topics such as childhood, wartime, and romantic experiences. It records videos that can be shared with family members via text or email.

- [StoryWorth](#) – a digital and print method for collecting stories. Each week, you receive an email with a question to answer. At the end of the year, the company prints the answers along with photos in a high-quality hardbound book.
- [StoryCorps](#) – a nonprofit organization that records, preserves, and shares stories of people around the world. You can allow the company to add the recording to its archive at the Library of Congress or keep it private.
- [StoryCatcher Pro](#) – lets you record in real time and insert previously recorded clips and photos. You can save the finished product to your camera roll, the cloud, or Dropbox.

Reflections on This Exercise

Did you experience any challenges while completing this activity? What was hard? Easy? Explain.

How helpful was this exercise? _____
(1 = not very helpful, 5 = moderately helpful, 10 = extremely helpful)

What did you learn during this exercise?
